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Why Hasn't Putin Intervened in Armenia Yet? (Op-ed)

Don't expect Russian tanks to roll into Yerevan anytime soon.

By Simon Saradzhyan

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Vladimir Putin and Serzh Sargsyan **Kremlin Press Service**

The resignation of Armenia's Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan after more than a week of mass protests in Russia's backyard begs the question: Why has Moscow not intervened?

The demonstrators bring to mind "color revolutions" in the post-Soviet neighborhood that the Kremlin seems to abhor, like in Georgia and Ukraine. But even genuine revolutions, which Armenia has not yet seen, are not enough in and of themselves to prompt Russia to intervene.

For Moscow to intervene in one of its Soviet-era satellites at least two conditions need to be present. First, Vladimir Putin has to see an acute threat to Russia's vital national interests, such as the potential expansion of antagonistic Western-led alliances too close to Russia's

borders. Second, the chances for defending or advancing its interests through the use of force have to be relatively high.

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The first condition is missing in Armenia because the dominant, pro-Russian wing of the country's ruling elite has retained power. Sargsyan's Russia-friendly Republican Party and its Dashnak allies control a majority in parliament, which means they can nominate and approve the next prime minister.

If protest leader Nikol Pashinyan succeeds in ending the party of power's control of parliament through protests or early elections, then, yes, that would be a revolution. For Russia to intervene, however, Pashinyan would not only have to oust the current party of power, he would also have to show a determination to move Armenia into the EU or NATO. So far, Pashinyan has showed no such intentions, which should come as no surprise.

Whatever his personal views, he realizes NATO is in no mood to accept more post-Soviet states in the short to medium term, and Armenia, therefore, has no viable alternative but Russia as its guarantor of security, while it faces two hostile bordering states, Azerbaijan and Turkey.

That pro-Russian elites have so far remained in control of Armenia in spite of Sargsyan's resignation explains why Vladimir Putin — who is said to have a much cooler personal relationship with Sargsyan than with ex-President Robert Kocharyan — has not condemned the events in Armenia. Moreover, representatives of the Russian government and parliament vowed support for Armenia and some of them even welcomed the change, for example deputy speaker of the State Duma Igor Lebedev.

Armenia's situation stands in stark contrast to cases when former Soviet republics have come under the rule of leaders intent on bringing them into blocs that Russia views as unfriendly competitors, such as NATO and the EU.

Russia intervened in Georgia in 2008 because Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, with strong backing from George W. Bush, nearly succeeded in obtaining a Membership Action Plan from NATO.

By that time, Georgia had been growing both friendlier with the West and more democratic for over four years. Yet Putin did not intervene until he saw the Bush administration come close to winning a MAP for Georgia and Ukraine at NATO's Bucharest summit, which the Russian leader attended personally to head off the efforts.

Although the summit ultimately did not offer the MAPs, thanks in part to opposition from German Chancellor Angela Merkel, its final communique did say that "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO."

At the time, Putin probably thought he could not afford a double intervention into both Georgia and Ukraine. He picked Georgia, as least in part, because Saakashvili took Russia's

bait by launching a ground assault to establish control over breakaway South Ossetia.

Ukraine might have been next, but in 2010 its then-leader Viktor Yushchenko lost the presidency to the more Moscow-friendly Viktor Yanukovych, who made it clear he would not seek membership in NATO. The need to intervene in Ukraine subsided until 2014 when a pro-Western faction of Ukraine's ruling elite came to power again amid expectations it would take the country into the EU and NATO in the wake of the Euromaidan revolution.

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Russia, however, does not intervene militarily in its post-Soviet neighbors' affairs just because they have undergone a revolution or become more democratic or because their leaders want to build friendlier relations with Russia's competitors. A threat to Moscow's vital interests is the key.

Take Armenia: It is ranked as more democratic than Russia and it also has friendly relations with the West. It has recently signed an EU Association Agreement (though it was watered down because of Russia) and it participates in NATO's Partnership for Peace program. It has troops in the NATO-led campaign in Afghanistan and even had troops in the U.S.-led campaign in Iraq, which were withdrawn in 2008.

Yet Russia has not intervened in Armenia because its leadership has not displayed any ambition to pursue NATO membership. Kyrgyzstan has consistently been ranked more democratic than Putin's Russia and it even hosted a U.S. base (which Russia reportedly pressured Bishkek to close down). Yet Russia chose not to intervene during Kyrgyzstan's revolutions of 2005 and 2010, despite then-President Kurmanbek Bakiyev's pleas for such intervention in 2010.

Again, the reason is that the victorious opposition did not espouse a desire to remove the country from Russia's zone of influence to join or ally with a hostile bloc.

The second condition for Russia to intervene is that the overall situation in question has to be conducive to the use of force. In other words, Russian leaders must be sure they will prevail in a military confrontation or at least ensure a stalemate that would constrain the targeted state's ability to maintain activities Russia sees as seriously undermining its vital interests.

That condition is at least partially present in the case of Armenia. Russia is already heavily involved in Syria and Ukraine, and recent polls show that Russians aren't eager for further military engagement absent any clear threat to them or Russian-speaking minorities abroad.

However, Russia has a large military base in Armenia, so if Moscow were to decide to use force there, it could theoretically do so more quickly than in Ukraine or Georgia. But the consequences and costs of such an intervention could outweigh the benefits, especially in the absence of a dramatic change in Armenia's integration preferences, such as an "escape" to NATO.

Any attempt to take control of Armenia, especially in the absence of a credible threat to Russia's vital interests, would seriously undermine Moscow's efforts to keep other post-

Soviet republics in its international integration projects. It would demonstrate that even membership in Russian-led coalitions—like the Collective Security Treaty Organization and Eurasian Economic Union—does not preclude losses of territory or independence to Moscow.

These republics would then probably start looking around for guarantors and patrons other than Russia, forcing Moscow to expend resources on dealing with the consequences. So if not Armenia, then who, if anyone, could be next?

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